

## **Christ Exalted**

Numbers 21:4-9

Ephesians 2:1-10

John 3:14-21

Jesus throws quite a wobbly here. When we think about his crucifixion, the last thing that comes to mind is a rather strange story from the Old Testament about a bronze serpent. But it clearly comes to Jesus's mind:

And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

John 3:14-15

The story of the bronze serpent sat rather uneasily with the Jewish people. What made them different from the surrounding religions was that they did not have images – rather like Muslims in our own time. They took the second commandment seriously and literally

You shall not make any graven image. Exodus 20:4

In fact a several centuries after Moses had commanded the creation of the bronze serpent, King Hezekiah ordered its destruction because it had become an object of idolatrous worship (2 Kings 18:4). So it was inevitable that they found the very creation of the bronze serpent a little difficult. They made sense of it by insisting that the purpose of the bronze serpent was to turn the peoples minds to God and so to stir up their faith.

So Jesus seems to be saying that his own death on the cross will have the same purpose: people will look at it and it will stir up their faith, so they might believe and so have eternal life.

The use of the phrase 'lifted up' may be very significant. It may of course be quite literal: Jesus would have been nailed to the cross in a horizontal position, lying on the ground; the cross would then have been pulled into an upright position, falling into a hole in the ground.

But the word for 'lifted up' is also used in the New Testament to describe how Jesus was lifted into glory at his Ascension; St Luke in the Acts of the Apostles (2:33) uses exactly the same word although most modern English versions translate this not as the rather ordinary 'lifted up' but as 'exalted':

Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you both see and hear.

Acts 2:33 (NRSV)

St Paul uses the same word in his letter to the Philippians which, once more modern bibles translate as 'exalted':

Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Philippians 2:9-11

It seems entirely possible that when John wrote 'lifted up' he was very aware of its suggestions of being 'exalted'. On a number of occasions he refers to Jesus' death as glorification; he reports Jesus' own words in Jerusalem that 'the hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified' (12:23) and records Jesus' own use of the phrase 'When I am lifted up for the earth I shall draw all people to myself.' (John 12:32)

John is very clear, as is St Paul, that the crucifixion is a glorification because it is the purpose of Jesus' life. Indeed the last words of Jesus as recorded by John are 'It is finished', or 'it is accomplished'. 'I've done it!' (John 19:30)

The idea that Jesus is exalted on the cross may lead us to reflect on the use of the cross as a Christian symbol. The simple cross is, without doubt

the most common symbol. But in many parts of the church, including our own, the crucifix is common, the cross with the figure of the dying Christ.

Sometimes I am asked why, in the Catholic tradition, the crucifix is preferred. My reply is always that the point of the Christian faith is that it was Jesus who was crucified. The cross was the way thousands of people died in the Roman Empire, including, of course, two men either side of Jesus, but our focus is on one particular victim Paul wrote to the Corinthians 'We preach Christ crucified' (1:23) and so it is Christ crucified who is depicted in this church.

But those who dislike the crucifix object, with some cause, that the crucifix focuses on the death of Jesus rather than his resurrection. They are right – although a cross without the figure of Christ is not in itself a symbol of the resurrection: an empty cross either has no victim yet or the victim is dead and his body removed. The symbol which reminds us of both the resurrection and the crucifixion is that of the Christus Rex – Christ on the cross but triumphant, exalted, lifted up. It is a Christ not slumped over in death, but upright, alert, triumphant, arms outstretched in love; he is often depicted wearing the vestments of a priest. And of course we have just that symbol in both St Margaret's and St James – in St Margaret's behind the altar and at St James facing us every time we walk through the door.

In historical or literal terms it is nonsense, but it is not meant to be either: it symbolizes that Jesus has triumphed over Satan and all that is evil. In the words of a Palm Sunday hymn he 'reigns and triumphs from the tree.' What he triumphed over most of all is death, which is why Jesus goes on to say to Nicodemus in the gospel we heard to day that

God so loved the world that he gave his only Son,  
so that everyone who believes in him may not perish  
but may have eternal life.  
Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world  
to condemn the world,  
but in order that the world might be saved through him.

John 3:16-17

For all that Lent has a sombre and serious side to it, at heart it exists as a preparation for the celebration of Easter. And what we celebrate is not that that we have earned our way into heave but that Christ has given it to us out of the generosity of his own nature. Nothing could be more certain than that.

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